

The Effect of Community Demographics on Newspaper Coverage of The Sequester

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Introduction

An individual's knowledge about particular policies is a major factor in shaping opinions about that policy (Barabas and Jerit 2009). Therefore, the ways in which information is provided to everyday citizens is of considerable interest to political scientists. The literature establishes that the press is a primary transmitter of political information. By choosing to emphasize some issues over others, the press is able to drive debate (Kahn and Kenney 2002). Politicians, of course, seek positive coverage in the press to affect elective and legislative outcomes. The president is no exception, often “going public,” and campaigning for issue-oriented action, hoping for coverage by local newspapers (Barret and Peake 2007). One would expect differing amounts of coverage based on the political leanings of the newspaper's constituency. However, the literature varies, with some studies suggesting less coverage (Soha and Peake 2008) in more supportive communities, while others find negligible (Peake 2007) or positive effects of support (Barrett and Peake 2007).

Our aim is to abstract from the president specifically and to investigate the impact of community demographics on coverage of national politics more broadly. We focus on the sequester, the automatic federal budget cuts that went into effect on March 1, 2013. President Obama attempted to avert the sequester with a mixture of budget cuts and tax increases, the latter of which Republicans ultimately rejected. A week before the sequester was set to go into effect, the White House released targeted, state-by-state reports on the sequester's impact in an attempt to generate local press coverage, which theoretically would educate local communities and encourage citizens to pressure their lawmakers towards compromise. This study utilizes variation in communities' partisanship and exposure to the effects of the sequestration to identify factors that contribute to newspaper coverage of the issue.

Methods

Sample

The sample includes 221 newspapers' front pages for the days immediately prior to and after sequestration went into effect (February 27 to March 2, 2013). Papers were selected from all 50 states. For each state, we included the largest paper based on daily circulation, and a randomly selected group of other papers. Any paper, including the largest in the state, for which front pages were unavailable on the “Newseum” website on any of the days of the study were dropped from the sample.

Model and Variables

We rely on a count model since both dependent variables are count variables. A test showed no evidence of overdispersion, indicating that a Poisson regression is an appropriate model choice. The following two models were run:

$$S_i = \beta_0 + \beta C_i + \beta_2 D_i + \beta_3 R_i + \beta_4 A_i + \beta_5 G_i + \beta_6 P_i + \beta_7 U_i + \beta_8 E_i + \beta_9 L_i + \beta_{10} M_i + e_i$$

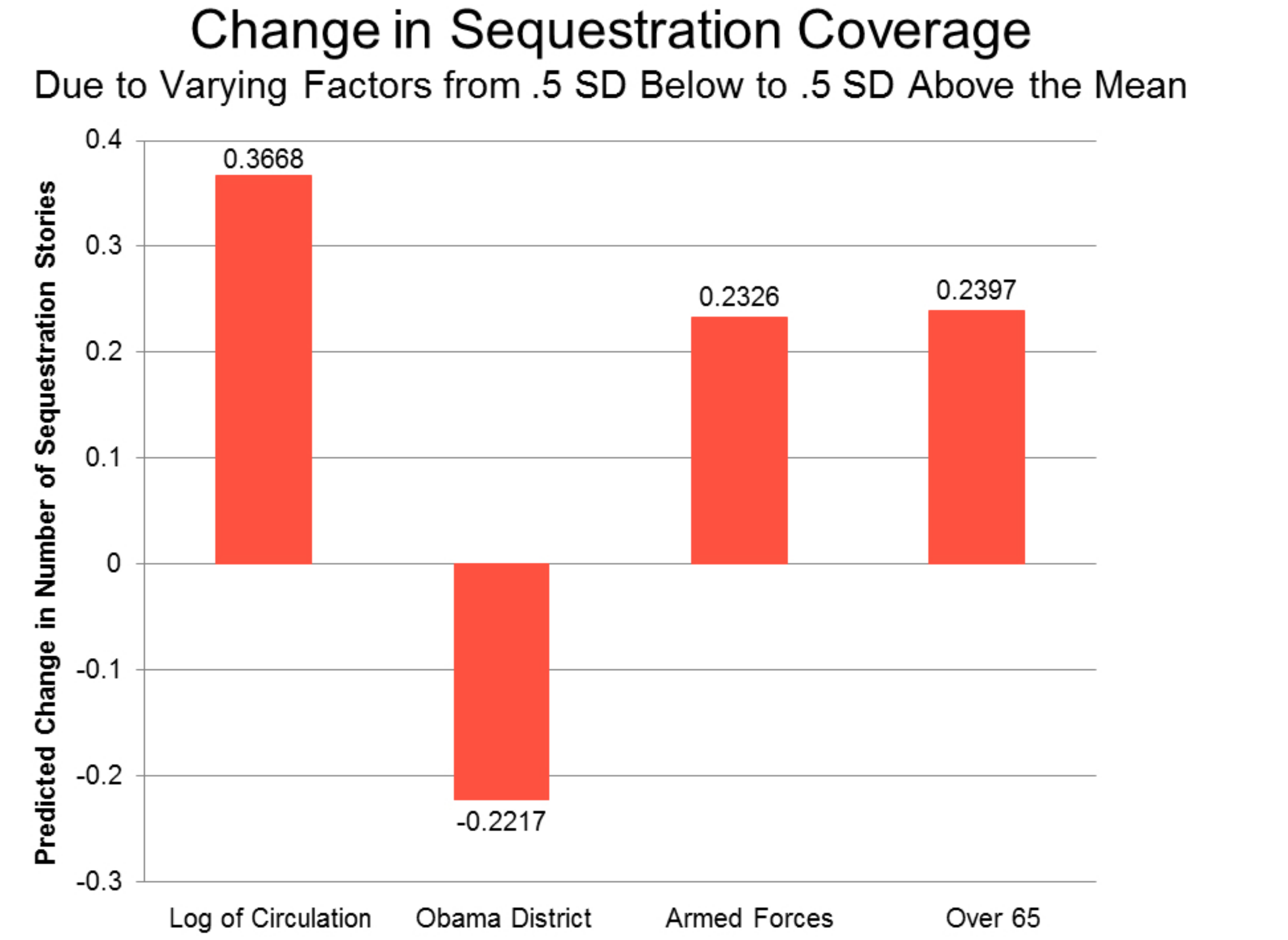
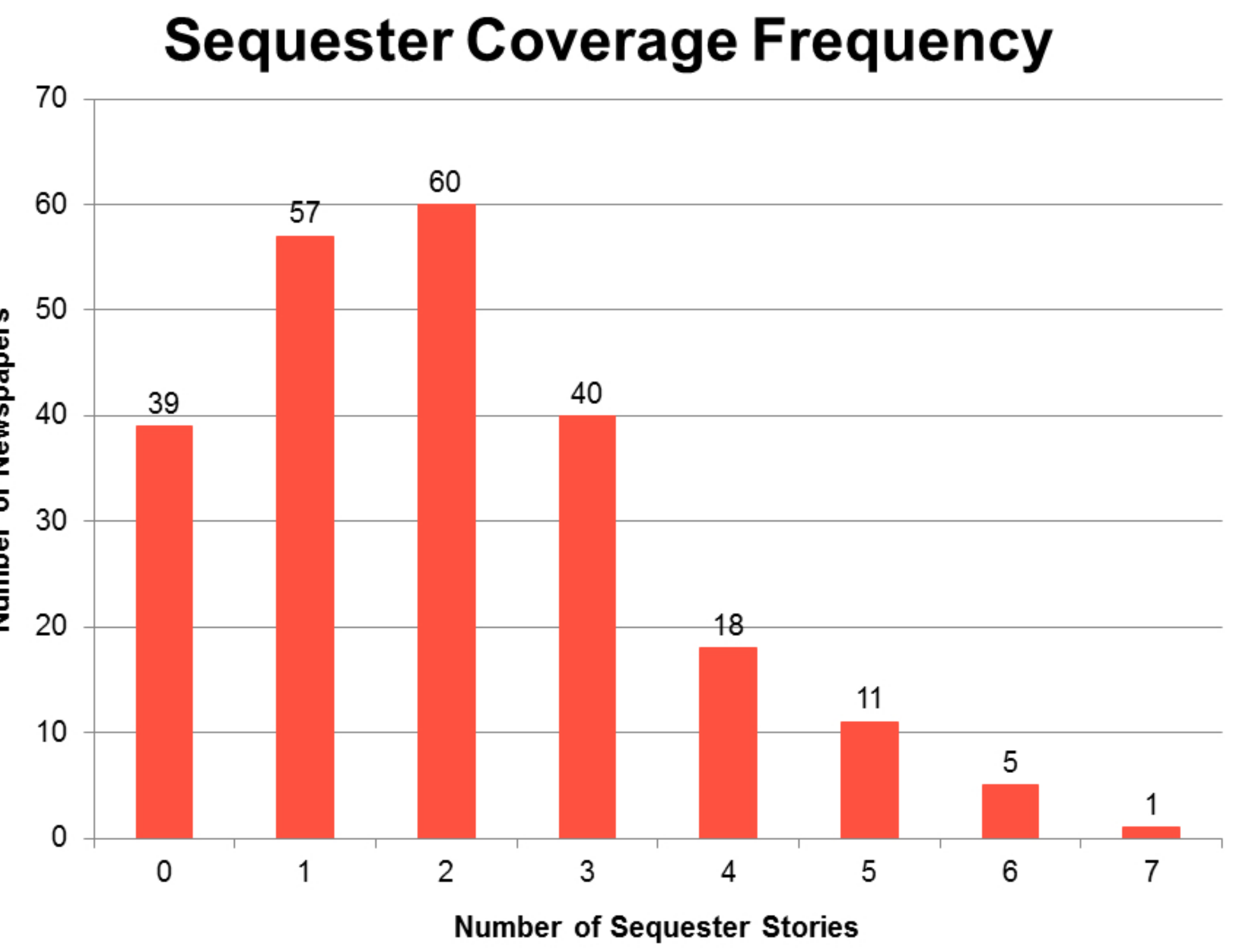
$$F_i = \beta_0 + \beta C_i + \beta_2 D_i + \beta_3 R_i + \beta_4 A_i + \beta_5 G_i + \beta_6 P_i + \beta_7 U_i + \beta_8 E_i + \beta_9 L_i + \beta_{10} M_i + e_i$$

Where:

- S_i = Total number of sequester stories
- F_i = Total number of sequester stories above the fold
- C_i = Log of newspaper circulation
- D_i = A measure of supportiveness for >52% Obama counties
- R_i = A measure of supportiveness for >52% Romney counties
- A_i = % of country population in the armed forces
- G_i = % of country population employed by the government
- P_i = % of county families that are below the poverty line
- U_i = % of population under 18 years old
- E_i = % of country population over 65 years old
- L_i = % of country residents that hold a bachelor's degree
- M_i = An indicator variable equal to 1 if the county is in Maryland or Virginia

Results

Determinants of Sequester Coverage		
	Total Coverage	Above the Fold Coverage
LogCirc	.1754*** (0.0563)	.2204*** (.0711)
ObamaDist	-1.445* (.8039)	-1.7318* (1.004)
RomneyDist	-.1497 (.8373)	1.0425 (1.0250)
ArmedForces	.0712*** (.0230)	.0889*** (.0257)
GovtWorkers	.0091 (.0120)	.0266* (.0145)
FamBelowPov	.0280 (.0176)	.0519** (.0215)
Under18	.0204 (.0239)	.0233 (.0286)
Over65	.0423** (.0180)	.0541** (.0218)
Bachelors	.0241* (.0139)	.0423** (.0173)
Maryland/Virginia	.3592 (.2257)	.6208** (.2495)
Constant	-3.0506*** (.9732)	-5.121*** (1.2181)
# of Observations	221	221
Pseudo R-Squared	.0437	.0727
Standard error in parentheses. Significance level: .10=*, .05=**, .01=***		



Discussion

The Obama district and Romney district variables were used instead of a pure Obama or Romney vote percentage in an effort to capture asymmetric effects. In other words, these variables tell us how coverage changes as a country becomes more Republican or Democratic relative to a more balanced county. Our findings, while only significant at the 10% level, suggest that as a district becomes more Democratic, coverage of the sequester lessens. This is particularly interesting when considering Obama's strategy to engage the media. While we have no way to determine the amount of coverage in the absence of the White House's efforts, the lack of coverage in friendly counties certainly does not reflect well on the strategy's efficacy.

In terms of community-level impacts, we found that factors like the percentage of a county's population in the armed forces and the percentage of the county's population over 65 years of age both drive coverage. Since the sequester had an disproportionately large effect on military communities and senior citizens (through civilian furloughs and cuts to programs like Meals on Wheels), these findings are logical. Interestingly, while many of the other community-level factors were not significant for general front-page coverage, when looking particularly at above the fold coverage, variables like the percentage of families below the poverty line and the Maryland/Virginia indicator became significant. This suggests that particularly affected communities may make coverage more prominent, although not necessarily more abundant.

References and Acknowledgments

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